United Nations E/CN.17/2008/12/Add.5

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
22 February 2008

Original: English

Commission on Sustainable Development
Sixteenth session
5-16 May 2008
Item 3 of the provisional agenda*
Thematic cluster for the implementation cycle 2008-2009 — review session

Economic Commission for Europe regional contribution to cycles of the Commission on Sustainable Development

Chairman's summary

Summary

The third Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) regional implementation meeting on sustainable development was held on 28 and 29 January 2008 in Geneva. In accordance with the Commission on Sustainable Development's multi-year programme of work, the meeting assessed the region's progress in implementing sustainable development commitments in the following thematic clusters: agriculture, rural development, land management, drought, desertification and Africa. As a basis for the discussions, the ECE secretariat had prepared two background documents (ECE/AC.25/2008/3 and ECE/AC.25/2008/4). Contributions were made by various partners in and outside the United Nations system, in particular the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, the World Meteorological Organization and the Africa Partnership Forum Support Unit of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. The outcomes of the discussions are reflected herein.

* E/CN.17/2008/1.

08-25066 (E) 100308

I. Overview

1. In preparation for the sixteenth session of the Commission on Sustainable Development, the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) member States and representatives of civil society, United Nations agencies and other international bodies met in Geneva to review the ECE region's progress in implementing World Summit on Sustainable Development commitments on the following thematic clusters: agriculture, rural development, land management, drought, desertification and Africa.

2. The regional implementation meeting focused on evaluating the progress achieved and obstacles and constraints remaining in each cluster. It also assessed the challenges ahead and necessary next steps to be taken. The meeting specifically addressed interlinkages between the thematic clusters. Its overall conclusion was that the region was not yet on track to deliver its World Summit on Sustainable Development commitments, but the discussion offered valuable insights into what could be done to accelerate progress, within the region and globally.

3. Regional and national differences significantly mark implementation experiences and priorities. This is apparent inside the ECE region as well as globally. It is important that the global review of progress take full account of these differences, and that at its sixteenth session the Commission on Sustainable Development recognize the contribution of the regions.

4. The thematic clusters need to be considered in the context of the overarching objectives of sustainable development: eradicating poverty, changing unsustainable patterns of production and consumption, and protecting the natural resource base for economic and social development.

5. The present summary was produced in consultation with the Chairs of the thematic sessions. It reviews the main issues raised during the discussions at the meeting and aims to capture the main challenges to progress so far, together with key opportunities to expedite the implementation of the commitments made.

II. Agriculture and rural development

6. The meeting considered that agriculture and rural development had an important role to play in the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation and the commitments of the ECE region to achieve internationally agreed development goals.

7. The agricultural production systems in most of the ECE region were highly advanced. Until recently, the region had seen continuing progress in meeting the growing demand for quality food, in particular organic food products.

8. In fostering sustainable agricultural practices, several ECE countries had developed initiatives that included cross-compliance, agri-environmental measures, set-aside areas, Natura 2000, conservation of genetic resources in agriculture, soil protection measures, the LEADER Initiative, organic agriculture measures and quality labelling systems.

9. Participants noted that the region needed to build on recent results in reforming the agriculture sector by making agricultural production greener, more

environment-friendly, more climate-friendly and less input-intensive, as well as by pressing ahead with trade liberalization.

10. Many speakers advocated sharing good practices, with due account to be paid to the differences in area conditions and country situations. It was noted that, contrary to the past perception of agriculture as an "old" business, it had become a highly complex, demanding and knowledge-intensive sector. There was a need to understand the complex interactions between various issues related to sustainable agricultural development.

11. Several speakers highlighted the importance of promoting a science-based approach for sustainable agriculture. They emphasized the need for developing the knowledge base and know-how in an integrated manner, bringing together research, extension and education to address the challenges relating to agriculture in the Economic Commission for Europe region. International cooperation was considered vital for helping to transfer this new knowledge.

12. Participants noted that sustainability could be accelerated through science and education in at least two ways: (a) the development and implementation of "integrated programming", encompassing everything from fundamental science to application and education; and (b) the use of communications technology for global access and the sharing of relevant research findings and practical applications.

13. Some speakers stressed that strategies to attain sustainability in natural resource-based endeavours such as agriculture included: (a) addressing land tenure issues, so that farmers had a long-term, vested interest in sustainable production; (b) fostering cooperatives to give farmers the collective power to influence markets; (c) stabilizing the financial systems used in the agricultural system; and (d) expanding knowledge and the application of ever-evolving scientific advances in the production, processing, distribution and use of agricultural products.

14. Promoting "agro-ecosystem management" was proposed as a possible way to balance the traditional agricultural goal of production with the goals of conservation and protection of natural resources, mitigation of environmental impacts, maintenance of ecosystem services and rural community viability.

15. It was mentioned that as farming had a long-term biologic production cycle, there was a need for policies and strategies that would give farmers stability and predictability. Transparent rules and regulations were necessary, especially in administration, as were risk-management tools.

16. Several ECE countries reported considerable growth rates in organic farming. This had resulted from a combination of factors, including subsidies, marketing efforts, the active engagement of the trade sector and the growing environmental awareness among consumers. Organic farming was emphasized as a contributor to maintaining natural landscape features, sustaining biodiversity and the quality of both groundwater and surface water, and protecting against water and wind erosion, especially in mountains and arid areas.

17. Many participants highlighted the importance of further changing consumer behaviour to support sustainable agriculture and food production. This would require raising consumer awareness and enhancing the transparency of consumer information through, in particular, better product labelling and standardization practices throughout the food production chain.

18. The specific conditions of agriculture in mountain regions and of remote rural areas should be addressed through appropriate policies, legislation and institutions, with the active participation of the local communities in decision-making processes.

19. Some speakers proposed linking internal agriculture reform processes with pertinent international processes, including global trade negotiations and key sustainable development discussions such as those on climate change. The climate-change issue was considered by many to be a pivotal challenge that required developing mitigation and adaptation strategies for the agricultural sector, including measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and support carbon sequestration. Several good practices for reducing greenhouse gas emissions from agriculture were described in the discussion.

20. Several interventions addressed the issues related to bioenergy production and associated risks. The increasing demand for agricultural feedstock for bioenergy production was creating pressures on land, water and other resources. In many countries in the Economic Commission for Europe region, there were no major land reserves that could be used for farming.

21. Assessing bioenergy issues from a variety of angles, including food competition and food security aspects, was proposed as means to create a set of criteria and policies that could achieve a balance between food and energy supply and take into account various options adapted to specific situations in individual countries. Participants also stressed the importance of setting standards regarding environmental, social and economic issues in the industrial production of biomass. Round-table discussions with stakeholders from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and businesses should be conducted on these pressing aspects in the near future.

22. ECE member States faced a challenge with respect to demonstrating to the international community that it would be possible to achieve a balanced approach that would allow the continued expansion of bioenergy production on the one hand and sustainable agriculture and the protection of the natural resource base on the other.

23. Many speakers emphasized the role of international cooperation in promoting discussions on sustainable agriculture and rural development. Various organizations, including those outside the United Nations system, should be involved to bring all stakeholders into the discussion. Examples of good practices and partnerships should be shared through the matrix and the partnerships website of the Commission on Sustainable Development. Certain speakers called for strong support for the implementation of the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture.

24. Some speakers highlighted that the main challenges for the ECE region included coherently meeting the objectives of poverty eradication, food security and sustainable natural resource management and addressing social and environmental impacts throughout the life cycle of food production.

III. Land management

25. The meeting called for a strengthened effort to foster sustainable use of natural resources and soil preservation as well as to promote equitable access to land,

enforceable land rights and transparent land policy. Equal access to land for women remained a concern in parts of the region.

26. As land resources were very limited in many parts of the ECE region, their good stewardship was at the heart of good governance.

27. Appropriate legal frameworks supported by robust land policies were required, together with proper tools for their implementation. Clear and unambiguous land tenure and registration systems, together with effective land administration mechanisms, would help promote investments and good land management, including sustainable natural resource management. The use of up-to-date technologies in land registration systems should be promoted, and transparency in land ownership should be ensured.

28. Land management was facing crucial environmental challenges, e.g., soil degradation and impacts of pollution. Climate change implications also needed to be addressed by appropriate land management policies.

29. Land management should anticipate and resolve social conflicts arising from various demands relating to land use. Rights of indigenous peoples and other vulnerable groups should be taken into account. Traditional forms of land use were still important in the region, especially for Arctic and nomadic populations. The participation of local communities and the involvement of citizens should be strengthened in land-planning procedures.

30. Integrated multisectoral development plans were required to appropriately address the multifunctional purpose of rural areas, especially in countries with high population density.

31. The conversion of agricultural land to other uses, particularly for housing and development, needed to be addressed. Depending on local conditions, this could be done by various measures, including tax breaks for long-term commitments to maintain land in agricultural production as well as zoning regulations.

32. The continuing engagement of donors in land-related activities at different levels should be encouraged. Mutual sharing of knowledge and experiences with all stakeholders could support sustainable development.

IV. Desertification and drought

33. Participants recognized that soil degradation had a major impact on other areas, notably surface water and groundwater protection, human health, climate change, protection of nature and biodiversity, and food security.

34. Both developed and developing countries were affected by desertification, land degradation and drought. The occurrence of water scarcity and droughts had been increasing in both intensity and frequency in recent years, affecting countries at different levels.

35. Desertification, land degradation and drought posed a serious and long-term challenge that had the potential to affect every part of the globe, undermine poverty and hunger eradication efforts and threaten the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. In many countries, adequate policy and legal frameworks had not yet been developed.

36. Assessment and deeper understanding of the interactions between biophysical, social and economic factors were also required. In particular, better knowledge needed to be developed and disseminated regarding the cost of inaction, as well as income forgone because of land degradation.

37. The use of improved soil management techniques had been recognized as crucial for protecting land from erosion and promoting the use of organic soil matter to retain soil moisture, thus also protecting valuable water resources.

38. National action plans were the main instruments to combat desertification and land degradation at the national level. However, only 14 out of 31 affected countries of the pan-European region had such plans in place. The integration of national action plans to combat desertification and drought with national strategies for sustainable development was required. In addition, strengthening cooperation among institutions and local authorities and the national convention bodies of the three Rio Conventions,[1] as well as regional conventions, was needed to ensure their coordinated and synergistic implementation.

39. The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification and its 10-year strategic plan and framework to enhance implementation (2008-2018) were important tools for achieving sustainable development. Common targets and indicators to monitor progress in the scientific, environmental and socio-economic aspects of desertification and drought should be developed, as well as comprehensive drought-preparedness and drought-relief schemes for drought-prone areas. In addition, designing programmes to cope with environmental refugees was an urgent task.

40. Participants noted that the success of the implementation of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification depended on the political will to involve and motivate all stakeholders, including women and youth.

41. Implementation of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification had been recognized as a powerful means for adapting to climate change. Hence, channelling adaptation funding into relevant activities should be ensured. A synergistic approach in afforestation and reforestation projects should also be promoted.

42. Developing subregional drought-management centres in European and Central Asian countries had been recognized as a useful step towards improving drought preparedness and assessment and strengthening the knowledge base vis-à-vis combating and controlling desertification and managing drought. Such centres could help promote harmonized programmes, organized exchanges of experience and technical and scientific cooperation in the field of drought mitigation.

43. Participants noted that it was time to move from a crisis-management approach to prevention and preparedness actions to tackle the impacts of drought. This included developing early warning systems. Drought-management planning should also comprise cross-border coordination, public participation, education and training.

[1] The Convention on Biological Diversity, the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

44. The impacts of drought and desertification, such as natural resource degradation, had been recognized as driving forces of migration, tensions and conflicts in affected areas. Tackling those transboundary issues required joint action. However, at the national level, sustainable land management and integrated water resources management should be recognized as powerful means for preventing migration, tensions and conflicts. To address water scarcity and drought, it was necessary to develop an appropriate set of measures within river basin management plans.

45. Participants further noted that to strengthen scientific and technical cooperation and information dissemination within and outside the region, financial resources were needed.

V. Africa

46. Participants noted that, unlike in other developing regions of the world where progress towards meeting Millennium Development Goal 1 (to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger) had been tangible, in sub-Saharan Africa the level and nature of economic growth had not yet yielded any significant progress for the population living below the poverty line.

47. Increasing numbers of poor Africans lived in rural areas, where their livelihoods depended primarily on activities related directly or indirectly to agriculture, a sector proven to have great potential for lifting people out of poverty. Most African economies continued to rely heavily on agriculture and natural resources for a significant share of gross domestic product, national food needs, employment and export revenue. This fact strongly underscored the need for a substantial transformation of the African rural sector.

48. Many African countries had undertaken land reforms that addressed, inter alia, land and natural resource rights and policies in the region, with the active participation of civil society organizations. For Africa to realize the full potential of all members of society, more should be done to ensure that land-policy reforms were accompanied by appropriate mechanisms that guaranteed women's equal rights to land.

49. Drought and desertification continued to threaten the livelihoods of millions of people in Africa, increasingly making them unable to rise above poverty. This trend was set to worsen with the onset of climate change, to which many countries in the region were highly vulnerable. Thus, drought and desertification were at the heart of development challenges in Africa and merited urgent attention, through policies and actions, at various levels.

50. Participants recognized that addressing Africa's sustainable development challenges required an integrated, interlinked approach, one that recognized the complexity of ecosystem dynamics as well as their interface with equally complex social, economic and political dynamics. There was a need for effective action by all stakeholders, including Governments, civil society, the private sector and development partners, with a view to accelerating progress towards meeting Africa's sustainable development goals.

51. While Governments continued to shoulder the primary responsibility for fighting poverty in their respective countries, concerted efforts were required at the regional and global levels to enable Africa to meet its poverty-related targets.

52. To achieve sustainable development and attain the Millennium Development Goals, the effectiveness of aid delivery needed to be improved. All parties should assume their responsibilities in implementing the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, taking into account improved ownership, governance, financial management and accountability, as well as the involvement of parliaments, local communities, civil society and other stakeholders.

53. Participants also emphasized the importance of improved donor coordination and complementarity. They recognized the need to work towards joint multi-annual programming based on partner countries' poverty reduction strategies. Other tools mentioned included common implementation mechanisms, shared analyses, joint donor-wide missions and co-financing arrangements to address the challenges confronting Africa, such as the security implications of natural disasters, HIV/AIDS, access to sustainable energy and water, gender equality, democratic governance, strengthening civil society, improving education and enhancing science and technology capacities.

54. Many speakers highlighted the commitment of their Governments to better integrating African countries into the global economy by placing development at the heart of the multilateral trading system to improve competitiveness, infrastructure and trade-related capacities for better market access.

55. Participants stressed that with the completion of economic transformation processes in some parts of Europe, there was an increased potential to redirect aid to Africa. Examples of donor cooperation with Africa were presented.

56. A proposal was made by an NGO to organize a special high-level event with a women's network of ministers, deputy ministers, scientists, professionals in agriculture and civil society leaders in May 2008 in New York.

VI. Interlinkages and cross-cutting issues

57. The regional implementation meeting highlighted the importance of interlinkages between agriculture, land management and the natural resource base, with a focus on water, energy, climate change and biodiversity. A better understanding of relationships between short- and long-term solutions was crucial. The cross-cutting goal of changing unsustainable consumption patterns, with a focus on food consumption, was stressed by many speakers.

58. Strong interlinkages between agriculture, land management and the natural resource base had not always been properly taken into account, resulting in the degradation of that base by impacts of climate change (e.g., droughts, floods and effects on the water supply) and the loss of biodiversity, thus affecting the quality of ecosystem services. Global warming could affect local and regional biodiversity dramatically, and might increase the frequency of extreme climate events such as floods and droughts.

59. The impacts of climate change on water included reduced availability of water in many countries in the ECE region. The most affected areas experiencing water

stress were in southern Europe and Central Asia. In a situation of rapidly increasing water scarcity, adaptation options for agriculture necessarily included measures for achieving greater water efficiency. As increased water efficiency was very much dependent on proper water pricing, the commercialization of water companies, including the reform of tariff systems, was considered an important option.

60. Mitigation and adaptation measures needed to be further implemented and integrated within the integrated water resources management plans and strategies. This would help sustain the provision of drinking water and sanitation services.

61. Many speakers pointed out that the increased stress on natural resources caused by unsustainable production patterns had overexploited the planet's natural resource reserves and, combined with ever-increasing unsustainable consumption habits, had continued to exacerbate environmental hazards. Growing consumption appeared to outstrip the environmental improvements achieved by means of environmental technologies.

62. Participants noted that energy consumption per capita had grown more rapidly in the developed countries, whereas the population had done so in the developing countries. In this context, the driving forces of current consumption and production patterns vis-à-vis energy supply and demand in the ECE region had to be reversed.

63. The meeting proposed that research be intensified on the life cycle impacts of products and services to promote eco-design and on the role of advertising and the media as creators and drivers of consumption habits. The need was emphasized for indicators that would measure not only economic activity, but also other aspects of sustainable development.

64. Participants also considered it crucial to reflect environmental costs in prices and to improve and widely implement the sustainability-oriented labelling standards for products and services. The business community should have a role and responsibility in promoting sustainable production and consumption through such mechanisms as corporate social responsibility.

65. Several speakers highlighted that the greening of all policies and the decoupling of economic growth and environmental degradation lay at the core of sustainable development strategies. The latter had to combine social, economic and environmental considerations and foster policy coherence among all policy sectors. The actions and programmes to be implemented had to be economically viable, which might require changes in the habits of individuals, as well as institutions.

66. Questions of unemployment were raised in the discussion. It was mentioned that overall employment and job quality were plummeting in the agriculture sector in many parts of the world, when they should instead be rising and be a means of addressing poverty and social inequality. Participants also noted that occupational and public health issues continued to pose serious barriers to the promotion of sustainable development.

67. The promotion of coherence in capacity-building and of a participatory approach to national sustainable development strategies and research policies was highlighted. Early and sustained engagement, comprising a broad range of stakeholders in all policy areas, would increase overall policy coherence.

68. A number of speakers emphasized the importance of education for sustainable development. Knowledge-sharing, the exchange of experience and information on good practices, needed to be promoted. The meeting proposed the creation of synergies between the Commission on Sustainable Development process and the implementation of the ECE strategy for education for sustainable development.